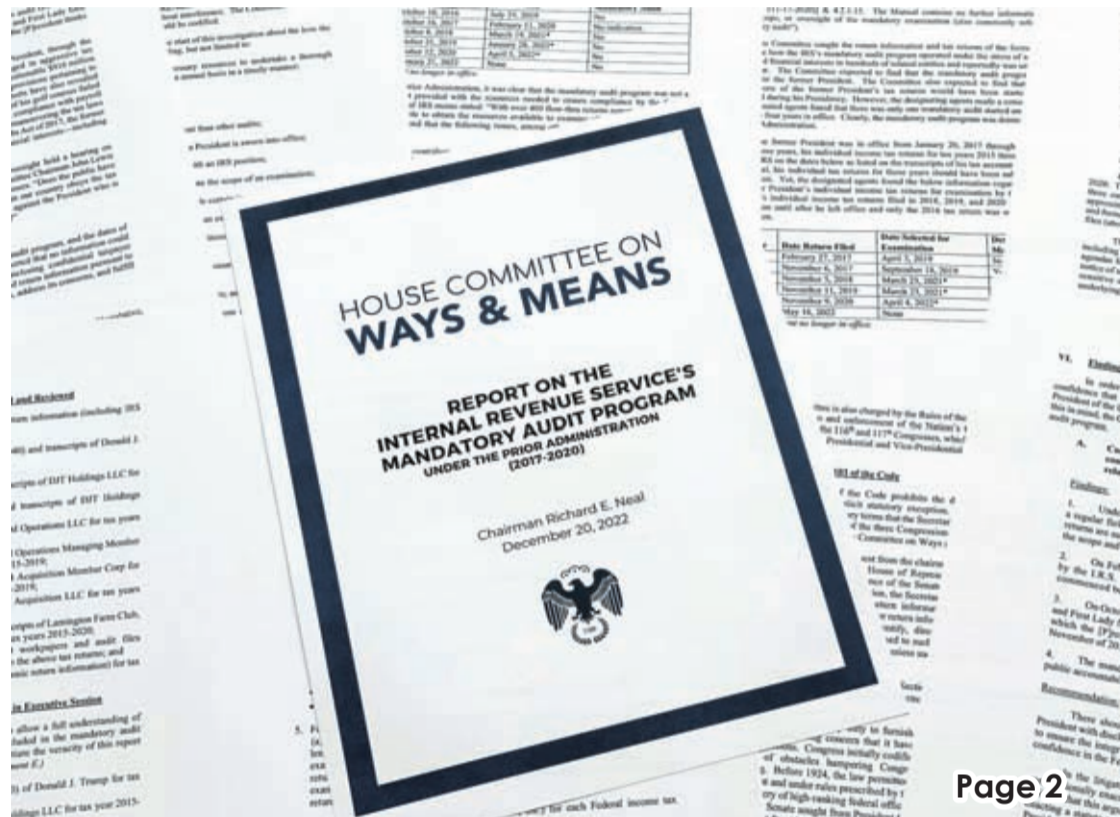




IRS mandatory presidential audit policy goes under spotlight



The report from the House Ways & Means Committee, regarding the IRS and former President Donald Trump's tax returns, is photographed Wednesday, Dec. 21, 2022.

Associated Press

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IRS mandatory presidential audit policy goes under spotlight

By **FATIMA HUSSEIN**

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — An IRS policy governing the audits of tax returns filed by U.S. presidents is under new scrutiny after a report published by a congressional panel found the agency failed to perform the mandatory inspection of Donald Trump's returns until Congress pressed for information about the process. The three-point policy states that individual returns for the president and the vice president are subject to mandatory review, "should always be kept in an orange folder," should be kept from the eyes of IRS employees and "should be locked in a secure drawer or cabinet when the examiner or reviewer is away from the work area."

The report released Tuesday by the Democratic majority on the House Ways and Means Committee said the process, which dates to 1977, was "dormant, at best" during the early years of the Trump administration. By comparison, there were audits of President Joe Biden for the 2020 and 2021 tax years, said Andrew Bates, a White House spokesman. The first determined the Bidens were due an additional federal income tax refund, Bates said by emails. The second, for 2021, "found that they owed an additional \$13, which could have been waived under IRS policy but they chose to pay."



Information on former President Donald Trump's tax returns, released in a staff report by the Joint Committee on Taxation, are photographed Wednesday, Dec. 21, 2022.

A spokesperson for former President Barack Obama said Obama was audited in each of his eight years in office. Democrats in Congress are responding by introducing legislation that would codify the IRS policy into law with more stringent requirements. Tax experts say the failure to launch the audit earlier is emblematic of a larger problem regarding the IRS' capacity to examine high-income taxpayers' returns — and a reminder of Trump as a norm-defying president. John Koskinen, who served as IRS commissioner during both the Obama and Trump administrations, said the policy has been out of

the public eye because presidents have traditionally released their tax-return summaries to the public. "It only became an issue with a president who refused to release his tax returns," Koskinen said. "If Trump had been releasing his returns, nobody would have raised this issue." Trump's tax returns being handed over to Congress recently is the culmination of a yearslong legal fight between Trump and Democratic lawmakers. Steve Rosenthal, senior fellow at the Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center, said the IRS' failure to audit Trump shows that "the mandatory auditing program is broken, we cannot rely on the current system to fairly audit

the president, and there's a general problem of the IRS auditing sophisticated taxpayers." Rosenthal added: "This is a much larger problem than Donald Trump — yes, he makes bad things worse, but the situation was bad to begin with." A new \$80 billion infusion of funds through the so-called Inflation Reduction Act is supposed to remedy the beleaguered agency's low staffing levels, outdated technology and host of other issues. Republicans who are poised to take control of the House in less than two weeks, however, have said they want to cut that funding. Tuesday's committee report revealed that the IRS

only began to audit Trump's 2016 tax filings on April 3, 2019, more than two years into Trump's presidency and just months after Democrats took control of the House. That date coincides with Rep. Richard Neal, D-Mass., the panel chairman, asking the IRS for information related to Trump's tax returns.

The report's findings prompted lawmakers to recommend a statutory requirement for the mandatory examination of the president's taxes, with "disclosure of certain audit information and related returns in a timely manner." Senate Finance Committee Chair Ron Wyden, D-Ore., said he will work to pass the bill through the Senate. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said the chamber would "move swiftly" to advance the legislation. The issue highlights frustration with the so-called tax gap, which is the difference between how much money is owed to the federal government and how much is paid. IRS data released in October projects that for 2017 to 2019, the estimated average gross tax gap will be \$540 billion per year. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in August, and has repeated at various speaking engagements, that the new funds allocated by Congress would be used to increase audits on high-wealth individuals, firms and complex pass-throughs. □



A man walks past Chinese and Hong Kong flags to celebrate the 25th anniversary of Hong Kong handover to China, in Hong Kong, on June 24, 2022.

Associated Press

WTO rejects U.S. 'Made in China' labeling on Hong Kong goods

By **JAMEY KEATEN**

Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — World Trade Organization arbitrators concluded Wednesday that the United States was out of line in requiring that products from Hong Kong be labeled as "Made in China," a move that was part of Washington's response to a crackdown on pro-democracy protests there in 2019-2020. A WTO dispute panel found

the U.S. violated its obligations under the trade body's rules and rejected Washington's argument that U.S. "essential security interests" allowed for such labeling. The panel said the situation did not pose an "emergency" that would justify such an exemption under the trade body's rules. The United States or Hong Kong could appeal the ruling to the WTO's appeals court. However, the

Appellate Body is currently inactive because the U.S. has almost single-handedly held up appointments of new members to the court amid concerns it had exceeded its mandate. So any such appeal would go into an arbitration void and remain unsettled. The United States Trade Representative's office indicated it would ignore Wednesday's ruling anyway. □

International migration drove U.S. population growth in 2022

By MIKE SCHNEIDER

Associated Press

The U.S. population expanded by 1.2 million people this year, with growth largely driven by international migration, and the nation now has 333.2 million residents, according to estimates released Thursday by the U.S. Census Bureau. Net international migration the number of people moving into the U.S. minus the number of people leaving was more than 1 million residents from 2021 to 2022. That represented a growth rate of 168% over the previous year's 376,029 international migrants, with every state gaining residents from abroad, according to the 2022 population estimates. Natural growth the number of births minus the number of deaths added another 245,080 people to the total in what was the first year-over-year increase in total births since 2007. This year's U.S. annual growth rate of 0.4% was a rebound of sorts from the 0.1% growth rate during the worst of the pandemic from 2020 to 2021, which was the lowest since the nation's founding. "It's welcome because we



Homes in suburban Salt Lake City are shown, April 13, 2019.

Associated Press

would have been back to almost flatline growth if not for this immigration," said William Frey, a demographer at The Brookings Institution. Regionally, the Northeast lost almost 219,000 people in a trend largely driven by domestic residents moving out of New York, New Jersey and Massachusetts, as well as deaths outpacing births in Pennsylvania. The Midwest also lost almost

49,000 residents, driven in part by people moving out of Illinois and deaths outpacing births in Ohio. The South gained 1.3 million residents, the largest of any region, driven by population gains in Texas and Florida that approached a half-million residents each. Other Southern states like North Carolina, Georgia, South Carolina and Tennessee had among the largest growth in numbers in the

U.S. But California lost more than 113,000 residents, and had a population just over 39 million in 2022, in what was the biggest annual decline behind New York's more than 180,000-resident loss. The population decline was driven by more than 343,000 domestic residents moving out of California, and it helped drag down the West region's population gain to only 153,000 residents.

Despite the overall population loss, California had the largest growth of any state in international residents, just a hair's breadth ahead of Florida with more than 125,000 people. California also had the second highest natural increase, only trailing Texas. Births outpacing deaths and the international arrivals made California's population loss smaller than last year, when it dropped by more than 358,000 residents. The West region in 2022 lost some of its luster as a magnet for domestic migration. Without international migration and a sizeable natural increase from births outpacing deaths, the West region would have lost population due to domestic residents also moving out of Oregon and Washington. Western hotspots like Utah, Idaho and Montana had smaller gains than last year. Some of the slower growth in the West has to do with the pandemic, which led to fewer people moving, and also the increasing cost of living in places once regarded as cheaper alternatives to California, according to Frey. □

West Point moves to vanquish Confederate symbols from campus

By BOBBY CAINA CALVAN

Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Before turning against the U.S. military to command the Confederate army, Robert E. Lee served as the superintendent of West Point, the hallowed military academy that produced patriots like Ulysses S. Grant, Douglas MacArthur and Dwight Eisenhower. But in the coming days, the storied academy will take down a portrait of Lee dressed in his Confederate uniform from its library, where it has been hanging since the 1950s and place it in storage. It will also remove the stone bust of the Civil War's top southern general at Reconciliation Plaza. And Lee's quote about honor will be stripped from the acade-

my's Honor Plaza.

The moves are part of a Department of Defense directive issued in October ordering the academy to address racial injustice and do

away with installations that "commemorate or memorialize the Confederacy." That includes a trio of bronze panels, measuring 11 feet tall and 5 feet wide,



This photo provided by the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in New York shows the three bronze panels at one of the entrances to Bartlett Hall, at West Point, that depicts the history of the United States.

Associated Press

that depict significant events and figures in U.S. history, including Benjamin Franklin and Clara Barton. But the oversized plaques, dedicated in 1965, not only featured Lee and other supporters of the Confederacy but an image of an armed man in a hood, with "Ku Klux Klan" written below. The congressional Naming Commission, which initiated the changes at the academy, noted "there are clearly ties in the KKK to the Confederacy." In a message posted on the academy's website, Lt. Gen. Steve Gilland, the academy's superintendent, said it would begin complying with the commission's recommendations during the holiday break.

"We will conduct these actions with dignity and respect," he said. The United States Military Academy, as West Point is officially known, was established in 1809 along the bank of the Hudson River in upstate New York. The school has about 4,600 cadets, two-thirds of them white and about 13% Black, according to federal data. West Point was not the only installation under scrutiny by the congressional commission. It also recommended that eight other installations address symbols of the racist past. The U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, renamed buildings and roads that memorialized Confederate admirals or those who sought to perpetuate Black enslavement. □

Temperatures fall far and fast as winter storm threatens U.S.

By **HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH and JILL BLEED**
Associated Press

MISSION, Kan. (AP) — Temperatures plunged far and fast Thursday as a winter storm formed ahead of Christmas weekend, promising heavy snow, ice, flooding and powerful winds across a broad swath of the country and complicating holiday travel. The National Weather Service reported that temperatures across the central High Plains plummeted 50 degrees Fahrenheit in just a few hours. In much of the country, the Christmas weekend could be the coldest in decades.

"This is not like a snow day when you were a kid," President Joe Biden warned Thursday in the Oval Office after a briefing from federal officials. "This is serious stuff." The frigid air will move through the central United States to the east, with windchill advisories affecting about 135 million people over the coming days, weather service meteorologist Ashton Robinson Cook said Thursday. Forecasters are expecting a bomb cyclone when atmospheric pressure drops very quickly in a strong storm to develop near the Great Lakes, which will increase winds and create



Snow falls during a blizzard warning, Wednesday, Dec. 21, 2022, at the Old Capitol Building in Iowa City, Iowa.

blizzard conditions, Cook said. Already, roads in rural stretches of western South Dakota were blocked, leaving people stranded with dwindling supplies of food and heating sources. "It's just kind of scary for us here, we just kind of feel isolated and left out," said Shawn Bordeaux, a Democratic state lawmaker, who said he was running out of propane heat at his home near Mission on the Rosebud Indian Reservation because snow drifts made

it impossible for a delivery driver to re-supply him. In Texas, temperatures were expected to quickly plummet Thursday, but state leaders promised there wouldn't be a repeat of the February 2021 storm that overwhelmed the state's power grid and was blamed for hundreds of deaths. Gov. Greg Abbott, in a news conference Wednesday, was confident the state could handle the increased demand for energy as the temperatures

dropped. "I think trust will be earned over the next few days as people see that we have ultra-cold temperatures and the grid is going to be able to perform with ease," he said. The cold weather extended to El Paso and across the border into Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, where migrants have been camping outside or filling shelters as they await a decision on whether the U.S. will lift restrictions that have prevented many from seeking

asylum. Elsewhere in the U.S., authorities worried about the potential for power failures and warned people to take precautions to protect older and homeless people and livestock and, if possible, to postpone travel. "This event could be life-threatening if you are stranded with wind chills in the 30 below to 45 below zero range," according to an online post by the National Weather Service in Minnesota, where transportation and patrol officials reported dozens of crashes and vehicles off the road. Michigan State Police prepared to deploy additional troopers to help motorists. And along Interstate 90 in northern Indiana, crews were braced to clear as much as a foot of snow as meteorologists warned of blizzard conditions there starting Thursday evening. About 150 National Guard members also have been deployed to help snow-bound Indiana travelers. More than 1,700 flights had been canceled Thursday morning within, in or out of the U.S., according to the tracking site FlightAware, with Chicago O'Hare and Denver airports seeing the most. Freezing rain forced Delta to halt departures from its hub in Seattle. □

Associated Press

Arizona to remove shipping container wall from Mexico border

PHOENIX (AP) — Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey will take down a makeshift wall made of shipping containers at the Mexico border, settling a lawsuit and political tussle with the U.S. government over trespassing on federal lands. The Biden administration and the Republican governor entered into an agreement that Arizona will cease installing the containers in any national forest, according to court documents filed Wednesday in U.S. District Court in Phoenix. The agreement also calls for Arizona to remove the containers that were already installed in the re-

mote San Rafael Valley, in southeastern Cochise County, by Jan. 4 without damaging any natural resources. State agencies will have to consult with U.S. Forest Service representatives.



A long row of double-stacked shipping containers provide a new wall between the United States and Mexico in the remote section area of San Rafael Valley, Ariz., Thursday, Dec. 8, 2022.

Associated Press

Ducey has long maintained that the shipping containers were a temporary fixture. Even before the lawsuit, he wanted the federal government to say when it would fill any remaining gaps in the permanent border wall, as it announced it would a year ago. "For more than a year, the federal government has been touting their effort to resume construction of a permanent border barrier. Finally, after the situation on our border has turned into a full blown crisis, they've decided to act," C.J. Karamargin, Ducey's spokesman said. "Better late than never." "Final details are still being

worked out on how much it will cost and when it will start," Karamargin told The Associated Press. The resolution comes two weeks before Democrat Katie Hobbs, who opposes the construction, takes over as governor. The federal government filed a lawsuit last week against Ducey's administration on behalf of the Bureau of Reclamation, the Department of Agriculture and the Forest Service. The federal government "owes it to Arizonans and all Americans to release a timeline," Ducey wrote last week, responding to news of the pending federal lawsuit. □

On a roll: Croatia set for new currency, borderless travel

By SABINA NIKSIC

Associated Press

ZAGREB, Croatia (AP) —

More than nine years after Croatia became the European Union's newest member, the country is on a roll to make the most of its status as the EU member in the Balkans.

Croatia is adopting the EU's common currency, the euro, and joining the Schengen Area, Europe's visa-free travel area, on Jan. 1. Officials in the small nation of 4 million people predict the developments will be remembered as one of the country's biggest achievements since it gained independence during the breakup of Yugoslavia 31 years ago.

Adopting the euro offers economic benefits stemming from deeper financial ties with the currency's 19 other users and with the European Central Bank. It also means that the 340 million people who live in the current eurozone no longer will need to exchange their euros for Croatian kuna and can enter the country known for its stunning Adriatic coastline without stopping at border controls.



New Croatian euro coin depicting scientist Nikola Tesla is showcased at the Croatian central bank in Zagreb, Croatia, Wednesday, Dec. 14, 2022.

"After 10 years of membership (in the EU), we intentionally and deservedly reached the stage where we would become the only country in history to join the Schengen and eurozones on the same day," Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic said at a recent business conference on the upcoming integration milestones.

"Some countries achieved

the two goals one after another over a relatively short period of time, but none achieved both on the same day," he said, adding that the changes "will have a transformative impact on our economy." But not all Croats are so excited by the upcoming changes, especially the phasing out of their outgoing currency. Some are sentimental about the kuna,

which was introduced to secure monetary autonomy after Croatia's split from the former Yugoslavia and a 1991-95 war.

"The kuna was a symbol of Croatia's independence. We were all attached to it, so it will be a bit hard to get over its disappearance," Vladislav Studar, a veteran of the war between the forces of Croatia's government and those loyal to the

Serb-controlled Yugoslav army. "But what can we do? Life goes on,"

Stela Roso, a Zagreb resident, agreed: "It is a bit sad that we will no longer use the kuna because it was unique to our country, but in practical terms, (the currency switch) will make no difference to me."

Croatia joined the EU in 2013, the last time the country admitted a new member nation. To adopt the euro, the country had to fulfill a set of strict economic conditions, including having a stable exchange rate, controlled inflation and sound public spending. After EU finance ministers gave Croatia the green light in July to join the eurozone, the country's central bank had to make extensive preparations.

"We secured the (euro) banknotes for front-loading and the full volume needed for next year, and we are almost done minting the needed 600 million coins, around 93% of that number has already been minted," said Tihomir Mavricek, the executive director of the Croatian National Bank's cash department. □

Associated Press

Spain kicks off festivities with 'El Gordo' bumper lottery

By CIARÁN GILES

Associated Press

MADRID (AP) —

Spain kicked off the winter holidays with its huge Christmas lottery known as "El Gordo," and an unemployed Peruvian woman was among the winners of The Fat One's top 400,000-euro (\$425,000) prize Thursday. The winning ticket number was announced in Madrid's Teatro Real opera theater, where the woman, who was identified only by her first name, Perla, was immediately surrounded by reporters during the nationally televised event.

The woman said she lost her job at a café two years ago and had bought lottery tickets "everywhere I have visited this year." She

revealed she purchased the 20-euro ticket with the number 05490 that led to Thursday's win in Spain's northern Asturias region.

"I felt (the prize) it would strike me here today," she told reporters excitedly while standing beside her two children. The woman said she planned to use her lottery proceeds, which amount to some 325,000 euros after taxes, to buy an apartment in Madrid, where her children attend primary school and to make a donation to an unspecified church.

The incredibly popular El Gordo dishes out a total of 2.5 billion euros (\$2.7 billion) in prize money, much of it in hundreds of smaller amounts. Purchas-

ing and sharing tickets, known in Spanish as "décimos" (tenths) in the run-up to Christmas is a tradition among families, friends and co-workers, and in bars and sports and social clubs.

For weeks beforehand there are queues, even in the cold and rain, outside lottery offices, especially those which have sold prize-winning tickets in the past. Ticket sales begin months ahead - this year as early as July. The Dec. 22 lottery began in 1812. From the beginning, children from Madrid's San Ildefonso school have called out the winning numbers.

The children pick up balls showing ticket numbers and their corresponding prizes from two giant rolling



Two people in masks join a Christmas lottery tickets queue in downtown Madrid, Spain, Wednesday, Dec. 21, 2022. Spain's bumper Christmas lottery draw known as El Gordo, or The Fat One will be held on Dec. 22.

Associated Press

drums. They sing out both figures with a rhythmic cadence that is known to everyone in Spain.

Other lotteries have bigger individual top prizes but Spain's Christmas lottery, held each year on Dec. 22, is ranked as the world's

richest for the total prize money involved.

Spain established its national lottery as a charity in 1763 during the reign of King Carlos III. Its objective later became to shore up state coffers. It also helps several charities. □

Watchdog: Under 1% of Israel army probes yield prosecution

By ISABEL DEBRE

Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israeli soldiers accused of harming Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip over the last five years have been indicted in less than 1% of the hundreds of complaints against them, an Israeli rights group reported. The watchdog argued that Israel's military systematically fails to conduct a credible prosecution of itself.

Between 2017 and 2021, the Israeli military received 1,260 cases of alleged offenses by Israeli soldiers against Palestinians, including 409 cases involving the killing of Palestinians, according to military data obtained by the group Yesh Din and released Wednesday after a freedom of information request.

The Israeli military opened 248 criminal investigations into instances of possible misconduct in response to those complaints just 21.4% of the total, Yesh Din said. Only 11 investigations during that five year period have yielded indictments. In those cases, Israel's military prosecutors acted with leniency toward convicted



Palestinians carry the body of Jana Zakaran, 16, during her funeral in the West Bank city of Jenin, Monday, Dec. 12, 2022.

soldiers, the group added, with those sentenced for killing Palestinians serving only short-term military community service.

In response to a request for comment, the Israeli military contended there had been more charges filed against soldiers than Yesh Din had reported, with a total of 31 indictments lodged during the five-year period for offenses also involving

the use of weapons, property damage and violence against Palestinians.

"It should be noted that the majority of the proceedings ended in a punishment that includes actual imprisonment, in accordance with the general punishment policy," the military said. Rights groups and critics long have alleged Israeli military investigations into the killings of Palestinians

reflect a pattern of impunity. B'Tselem, a leading Israeli watchdog, grew so frustrated with the system that in 2016 it dismissed the probes as a whitewash and halted its decades-long practice of assisting investigations. The Israeli army says it has proved that its investigations are independent and professional. It attributed the many challenges to "a lack of coop-

eration on the part of the complainants."

"The likelihood of discovering the truth is directly impacted by the lack of cooperation," it said.

The 1,260 complaints lodged against the military by victims, lawyers, the Justice Ministry and others reflected just a fraction of the incidents that occurred in the occupied West Bank and Gaza over the years. B'Tselem has reported that Israeli security forces killed 819 Palestinians between 2017 and 2021, including in conflicts with Gaza militant groups.

Just 117 of those deaths prompted investigations, Yesh Din said. Violence has surged this year in the West Bank as Israel conducts daily arrest raids in response to a spate of Palestinian attacks this past spring that killed 19 people in Israel. At least 150 Palestinians have been killed, making 2022 the deadliest in 16 years.

The Israeli army says most of the Palestinians killed have been militants. But stone-throwing youths protesting the incursions and others not involved in confrontations have also been killed. □

Associated Press

Seoul: North Korean hackers stole \$1.2B in virtual assets

By HYUNG-JIN KIM

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korean hackers have stolen an estimated 1.5 trillion won (\$1.2 billion) in cryptocurrency and other virtual assets in the past five years, more than half of it this year alone, South Korea's spy agency said Thursday.

Experts and officials say North Korea has turned to crypto hacking and other illicit cyber activities as a source of badly needed foreign currency to support its fragile economy and fund its nuclear program following harsh U.N. sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic.

South Korea's main spy agency, the National Intelligence Service, said North

Korea's capacity to steal digital assets is considered among the best in the world because of the country's focus on cybercrimes since U.N. economic sanctions were toughened in 2017 in

response to its nuclear and missile tests.

The U.N. sanctions imposed in 2016-17 ban key North Korean exports such as coal, textiles and seafood and also led member



In this photo provided by the North Korean government, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, bottom center, attends a ruling party congress in Pyongyang, North Korea, on Jan. 12, 2021.

Associated Press

states to repatriate North Korean overseas workers. Its economy suffered further setbacks after it imposed some of the world's most draconian restrictions against the pandemic. The NIS said state-sponsored North Korean hackers are estimated to have stolen 1.5 trillion won (\$1.2 billion) in virtual assets around the world since 2017, including about 800 billion won (\$626 million) this year alone. It said more than 100 billion won (\$78 million) of the total came from South Korea.

It said North Korean hackers are expected to conduct more cyberattacks next year to steal advanced South Korean technologies and confidential information on South Korean for-

eign policy and national security.

Earlier this month, senior diplomats from the United States, South Korea and Japan agreed to increase efforts to curb illegal North Korean cyber activities. In February, a panel of U.N. experts said North Korea was continuing to steal hundreds of millions of dollars from financial institutions and cryptocurrency firms and exchanges.

Despite its economic difficulties, North Korea has carried out a record number of missile tests this year in what some experts say is an attempt to modernize its arsenal and boost its leverage in future negotiations with its rivals to win sanctions relief and other concessions. □

Prime minister elaborates on three levels for restoration, recovery and reconciliation process

ORANJESTAD – Last Monday, the government of the Netherlands apologized to Aruba and the Dutch Caribbean for the role of the Netherlands in the history of slavery. In the afternoon, prime minister of Aruba, Evelyn Wever-Croes together with Dutch Secretary of State for Justice and Security, Eric van der Burg held a press conference to elaborate and answer questions on the topic.



Wever-Croes explained in her answer to a question by the press regarding damage caused by slavery in the past and what this means in the context of restoration and monetary reparations for Aruba. She indicated that they are not so far in Aruba. She said that on the island, they want to have specially the direction that will be followed for what will come next, and currently they are thinking on three levels.

She said that the first level is symbolic. They need to decide what symbolism they think fits in Aruba for such an apology. This is a question that she emphasized she is not answering herself, rather, a commission will provide the answer. Wever-Croes added that they have already received good news from the Dutch government, through the Secretary of State, that they are ready to take part in a memorial to Virginia Dementricia, who is known in Aruba for being a slave who became almost a hero. "This you can say is an answer to the question, but I am not sure", Wever-Croes said.

The second level the prime minister mentioned is that they want to see improvement in education and awareness on the topic of slavery in the past. She explained that before that, they need to teach everyone in the community precisely about Aruba's slavery past in order to have a better understanding of the apology by the

Netherlands. In this context, the digitalization of the National Archive has a very important role. For this, Wever-Croes added, they received the good news that the Netherlands is ready to work together and provide more funding to continue with the digitalization of the archive. The Netherlands also indicated that they want to re-print a book by author Luc Alofs, and distribute it among the youth.

Luc Alofs (1960) is currently head teacher of Research at the University of Aruba and partner in the project Travelling Caribbean Heritage. He is also curator of the Historical Museum of Aruba, and president of the National Commission of UNESCO in Aruba. He has published various books, including "Who is Aruban? Social integration and nation forming in Aruba"; "Slaves without plantation, slavery and emancipation in Aruba", and "Subordination and separatism; colonial governance and local politics on Aruba, 1816-1955."

"This is all that we want to achieve in the second level regarding education and awareness. These are important and positive gestures", Wever-Croes commented.

As a third level, she continued explaining, they want to reflect on the damage that might have been caused because of slavery in the past. She said that last week a journalist asked her

how big the damage is, but she does not have an answer yet because they will now be carrying out the investigation. At this point she can say that some people or groups, neighborhoods and processes are disadvantaged because of slavery in the past.

"On top of that we need to do good research, and the question is, once this has been established, how can you update and how do you want to update the situation. Thus for Aruba, we are still on the path launched by the minister of Culture from 1st July this year until 1st July 2023. But before 1st July, we need to have a concrete plan and afterwards I will say something more concrete", Wever-Croes added.

She emphasized also that she mentioned in her speech on Monday morning that there is no need to search for many recommendations, there are already many recommendations and not all of these

apply to Aruba. The question is just to meet and dialogue with more parties in society to determine the direction in which Aruba needs to go. She added that she cannot put a price on damages.

"For us, today is very meaningful that this step was taken by the government of the Netherlands, and from this moment already we will be working on recovery, restoration and reconciliation," she emphasized.

Secretary of State, Eric van der Burg explained also that if we look at slavery in the past in the Dutch Caribbean, the countries that back then were not yet countries and Suriname, we can see great differences between the islands and Surinam. And to stay close to home, regarding slavery, there is a big difference between Curaçao and Aruba.

Van der Burg also mentioned that in his speech, Prime Minister Rutte talked

a lot about Suriname. He explained that on the one hand this has to do with awareness that still needs to be achieved in the Netherlands regarding the differences, between for example Curaçao and Suriname on the one hand, and Aruba and Bonaire on the other.

"If we see the situation in Aruba this was not comparable to what took place in Curaçao and Suriname. As I commented during the meeting this afternoon, if you are a slave, then for you it doesn't make a difference if you are one of 500 or one of 50,000 people, you have been enslaved", Van der Burg indicated. He commented that for the Netherlands it was very important to address all seven countries at the same time in order to make it clear that even though there are historical differences, there will be no differences in the futuro, and for individuals it will not make a difference.

"As your prime minister said, [Monday] morning we mentioned three cases that we are taking into consideration, but I mentioned also that aside from that we will allocate funds that will not be available only in European Netherlands. The money is also directed to Suriname and countries within the Kingdom and the special congregation in the Kingdom", he pointed out. □



Freewinds gives holiday cheer at the YMCA for the third year in a row

ORANJESTAD - The children had something extra to celebrate when crew members from the Freewinds stopped by the YMCA centers in San Nicolas and Dakota during the recent Christmas dinners for the kids presenting gifts that added extra holiday cheer for all involved.

The Freewinds arrived with a big gift box full of individually wrapped gifts, one for every child of every age. As the gifts were handed out the excitement and enthusiasm among the kids continued to build with the kids ripping open their gifts to see what was inside. All were very happy with what they had received.

Ms. Inki Geerman of the YMCA Aruba commented, "Thank you Freewinds for donating gifts for our Christmas celebration of our afterschool program. Your support makes the holidays extra magical for our participants while creating beautiful memories. We appreciate this very much!"

"Contributing to the local community is something that the Freewinds has always been noted for over the many years the ship has been calling to Aruba. It is something we enjoy doing. This is especially true during the Holiday Season. Seeing the happy faces of the children is something very special" said the Port Captain of the Freewinds, Mr. Ken Weber. □



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Minister Tjon met Mrs. Monique Mos to discuss the implementation of the new Dutch Code of Criminal Procedure



ORANJESTAD - The Minister of Justice and Social Affairs, Mr. Rocco Tjon, recently met with Mrs. Monique Moss, a member of the implementation preparation team for the new Dutch Code of Criminal Procedure.

The Netherlands allocated 450 million florins to implement this Code of Criminal Procedure.

During the Judicial Four Party Consultation (JVO), which took place in August of this year, Minister Tjon stated that Aruba will implement the new Code of Criminal Procedure in 2024, which makes Aruba the first partner in the Dutch Kingdom to adopt this Code.

Mrs. Mos said she was willing to provide support to Aruba in the process of implementing the new Code of Criminal Procedure. Mrs. Mos will hold several meetings with stakeholders, such as the Common



Court of Justice, the Public Prosecutor, the Police Department, and the Ministry of Justice and Social Affairs.

This new law contains lots of changes that will have a significant impact on practice.

Some changes include new investigation methods, changes in the rights of the detainees, victims, and legal representation. There will also be changes in custody and detention.

The goal of this meeting was to draw up a plan to initiate the implementation process where they will seek the needs in IT and required courses to have this included in the budget for 2024.

In the upcoming year, all police officers, the Public Prosecutor's Office, the Joint Court of Justice, and all relevant departments will undergo training in the new Code of Criminal Procedure. □

Pool of service providers with expertise in energy transition and/or climate change

ORANJESTAD - The Green Overseas "GO" Programme, funded by the European Union (EU) and implemented by Expertise France, is establishing a pool of service providers with expertise in energy transition and/or climate change resilience and with a solid knowledge of the EU Overseas Countries and Territories (OCTs) and the UK Overseas Territories (OTs) – in particular in the Caribbean region.

This pool of service providers is called the "Green Overseas Expertise Network".

Once selected to be part of the Network, the service providers will be invited to compete for specific contracts for the implementation of various activities in the EU OCTs and UK OTs.

Interested applicants (individual experts, consultancies, companies, NGOs, etc.) with suitable expertise and experience are invited to apply on PLACE, the French public procurement platform. The consultation's reference number is "2022/S 205-585112" □



Aruba's underwater wonderland



ORANJESTAD - Exploring the underwater wonders is something you should definitely do during your stay in Aruba. The underwater world has everything to offer that makes a snorkel trip so exceptional; an impressive, colorful sea life with exotic fishes, turtles and beautiful coral reef. The historic shipwrecks, located on the Aruban seabed are also worth a visit. Aruba is known for its white beaches and blue oceans, which means there are many fascinating under water spots, where you can take your snorkeling gear and we selected the top spots for you.

Tres Trapi

Tres Trapi means tree steps in Papiamentu, Papiamentu is together with Dutch the official language spoken on Aruba. The beach is called Tres Trapi because it is accessible by the tree steps carved into the rocks. Tres Trapi is a small rocky beach, located on the north-western side of the island, approximately 5 to 10 minute drive from Palm Beach. From the unique steps you can easily walk over the beach into the clear and turquoise blue ocean. While snorkeling you will encounter all kind of tropical fishes and sea stars. The kind of starfish you

will find in the Aruban waters is the red cushion sea star. This is a starfish that is commonly found in the shallow waters of the Caribbean sea and if you are lucky during your snorkeling visit to Tres Trapi, you may come across one of the green sea turtles. Respect the animal, keep your distance and enjoy the view. Also remember; it is a once in a life time experience.

Antilla shipwreck

Antilla is a 400-foot-long long ship, built in 1939 in Hamburg, Germany. Antilla came to Aruba, because it had to find a neutral port. When Germany invaded



the Netherlands on May 10, 1940, the crew decided to let their own ship sink, to prevent it from falling into the hands of the Dutch Navy. Antilla lies on its portside in Malmok bay, and the sunken world war two ship is now one of Aruba's most popular snorkeling and dive spots. However, the ship wreck can only be reached by boat. The ship is visible from the surface and during your snorkeling trip you be surrounded by hundreds of tropical fishes, but the ship wreck alone is already impressive enough.

Baby Beach

Baby beach; a white beach, with a crystal blue ocean. The beach is located on the southern part of the island. On the way to the famous beach, you will drive through the old capital of Aruba, San Nicolas. The old Aruban culture can be still felt and experienced here, so do not hesitate to get out of your car and walk around for a while. Baby beach is a child friendly beach, since it is shallow and the water has a pleasant temperature. The name therefore fits well with the beach. Baby beach is an excellent beach for snorkeling, espe-

cially if you want to go with small children, because the water remains shallow and there are still many underwater wonders to see. In the ocean there is an area marked until where it is recommended to snorkel and on the beach you will find different facilities. It is a perfect beach to spend your day snorkeling and relaxing.

Mangel Halto

Mangel Halto beach is located in Savaneta, on the southern-west part of the island. The beach is different from the other beaches in Aruba; it is beach full of mangroves. You reach the beach by a bridge through the mangroves and then you will have several entrances to the sea. There are diverse spots where you can enjoy a perfect beach day, wooden stairs made to enter the water and a dock to sit on and enjoy the view. Mangel Halto is also worth a visit for the snorkeling experience. Inside the bay, the water is clear and you find many colorful fish. Outside the bay is a bit more challenging for beginners because of the wind and the waves, but the coral is alive and it is just like snorkel heaven. □



Chanukah Concert to rock Aruba this Sunday

All invited – free admission

ORANJESTAD – Join us Sunday evening, December 25th, at 7pm at the Hyatt Regency parking lot for an incredible evening of Chanukah entertainment!

There will be Children's activities, an energy fire & dance show, a giant Menorah lighting and most importantly an exciting concert performance by the incredible Yoni Z from New York!

This Chanukah has so far been celebrated by hundreds across the island with menorah lightings at several resorts and beaches, a fantastic 30 car menorah parade and hundreds of latkes being served. Chabad has been busy giving out menorah kits to ensure that everyone on the island can celebrate this beautiful holiday. For more information about the concert and to purchase VIP seats please visit www.jewisharuba.com/Chanukah.

The concert and other Chanukah events have been generously sponsored by Caribbean Mercantile Bank (CMB), Hyatt Regency Aruba Resort and Casino, Ben Real Estate Services, Diamonds International Aruba, Daher Residence, 4D Photo Bar, Do-It Center, Cigar Emporium, Superfood Plaza, Digital View and MayDragon Fly Marketing and is hosted by Chabad Aruba.

Chanukah is the Jewish eight-day, wintertime "festival of lights" celebrated with nightly me-



norah lightings, special prayers and fried foods.

The joyous holiday is celebrated publicly to recall the victory of a militarily weak Jewish people who defeated the Syrian-Greeks who had overrun ancient Israel and sought to impose restrictions on the Jewish way of life and prohibit religious freedom. They also desecrated and defiled the Temple and the oils prepared for the lighting of the menorah, which was part of the daily service. Upon recapturing the Temple only one jar of undefiled oil was found, enough to burn only one day, but it lasted miraculously for eight. In commemoration, Jews celebrate Chanukah for eight days by lighting an eight-branched candelabrum known as a menorah. Today, people of all faiths consider the holiday a symbol and message of the triumph of freedom over oppression, of spirit over matter, of light over darkness.

The lights of Chanukah emphasize that every individual has the unique power to illuminate the



entire world, and for this reason we make an effort at Chabad to invite every single person to join us in celebrating this beautiful holiday! □

Christmas Song: a magical night in a great atmosphere



ORANJESTAD – Last week the concert **Canto di Pasco – Christmas Song** – took place at the **Klooster Imeldahof in Noord**, a building under the illumination of Christmas lights and decorations, where the live nativity scene from the group 'Angelnan di Rosario' could be seen.

The different choirs gave a beautiful presentation of Christmas songs which was splendorous in the monumental building. A jolly atmosphere reigned, and with the bazaar, people could enjoy snacks, food and Christmas crafts.

Kapel di Bethania Foundation thanks everyone who came to celebrate this season with them, also all members of the choirs who did their best efforts to give a beautiful presentation on that night. They

thank Tica Giel and Igmar Maduro who came with the initiative and coordinated the concert. To each person who helped in the bazaar, also volunteers and friends of the Kapel di Bethania foundation who gave their free time to assist.

Kapel di Bethania Foundation is looking back on a very fruitful year, and will continue with encouragement in 2023. They wish the entire community a Merry Christmas and Happy 2023. □

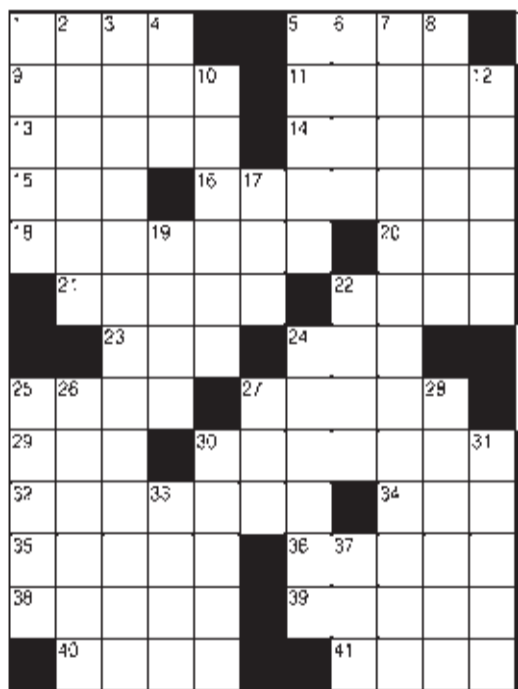


CROSSWORD

By THOMAS JOSEPH

- ACROSS** 38 Sculpting
1 Dearth medium
5 Dance bit 39 Move
9 Freshly sinuously
11 Met 40 Cuts off
performer 41 Tiny
13 Annual workers
visitor

- DOWN** Yesterday's answer
15 Greek 1 Surgery 8 Raft 24 Domains
vowel tool movers 25 Winter
16 Pecan 2 Some 10 Local footwear
candies marbles resident 26 Florid
18 Claret, 3 Breakfast 12 Stopwatch 27 Salon stuff
e.g. item button 28 Fast run
20 Hot blood 4 Young 17 French 30 Lugs
21 Colander's fox article 31 Enjoys
kin 5 Intent look 19 Fuse the tub
22 Sibilant 6 Circus together 33 Orange
summons sight 22 Place for cover
23 Hoppy 7 Breakfast a Paris 37 Copying
brew item picnic



12-23

AXYDLBAAXR
is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three I's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

12-23

CRYPTOQUOTE

XBMJM ZY QW RZQXMJ RZXBWEX
YQWR. QW YOJZQP RZXBWEX
YEQYBZQM. LQU QW BLOOZQMY
R Z X B W E X H W S O L Q Z W Q Y .

— IWJMLQ OJWKMJD

Yesterday's Cryptoquote: KINDNESS IS LIKE SNOW. IT BEAUTIFIES EVERYTHING IT COVERS.
— KAHILIL GIBRAN



Holiday procrastinators are back in force. Blame inflation.

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO

AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK (AP)— Last year, Lucila Gomez and her husband started their holiday shopping around Thanksgiving and wrapped it up a week before Christmas, spending \$750 on tablets and clothing for their three children and relatives. This year? Gomez is waiting until she gets her annual bonus on Friday to get started and she's limiting her spending to \$200, sticking to World Cup themed jerseys for her 10-year-old twins and a 6-year-old.

"Last year, we were confident. We were like, 'Get them whatever they want,'" said the 49-year-old Buckeye, Arizona resident, an hourly worker in the billing department of a health company. "This year, we're waiting until we both get paid. We want to go into the New Year not owing anything."

Last minute holiday shoppers are back in force and inflation is partly to blame. For the first two years of the pandemic, many were buying earlier in the season, afraid of not getting what they wanted because of shortages of products or delays in deliveries. They also had more money to spend thanks to government stimulus checks and child care credits.

But this year, supply chain snags have eased and shoppers aren't as worried about availability as they are about higher prices on everything from rent to food, causing them to postpone their buying until the last minute.

Gomez, for instance, said that even though she and her husband, an electrician, each got a raise, it



Shoppers carry shopping bags down Fifth Avenue, Monday, Dec. 19, 2022, in New York.

Associated Press

still wasn't enough to offset their rising expenses. In fact, she said her family moved in with her parents after their monthly rent jumped from \$1,500 to \$2,000 earlier this year. She'd hoped to save for a house, but mortgage rates keep going up.

Last minute shopping is also being encouraged by a quirk in this year's calendar, according to Brian Field, global leader of Sensormatic Solutions, which tracks store traffic. With Christmas falling on Sunday, consumers have all week to shop.

Retailers are relying on the last minute spending rush to help meet their holiday sales goals after a weaker-than-expected November. Americans cut back sharply on retail spending last month as the holiday shopping season began with high prices and rising interest rates taking their toll on households, particularly lower-income families.

Retail sales fell 0.6% from October to November after a sharp 1.3% rise the previous month, the government said last week. Sales fell at furniture, elec-

tronics, and home and garden stores.

Americans' spending has been intact ever since inflation first spiked almost 18 months ago, but the ability of shoppers to keep spending in a period of high inflation may be beginning to ease. Inflation has retreated from the four-decade high it reached this summer but remains elevated, enough to sap the spending power of consumers.

Still, overall holiday sales should be decent, though holiday sales growth is expected to dramatically slow down from a year ago. The National Retail Federation, the nation's largest retail trade group, is slated to release the actual results for the combined November and December period next month. The group expects holiday sales growth will slow to a range of 6% to 8%, compared with the blistering 13.5% growth of a year ago.

The last stretch of the holiday season is critical.

On average, the top 10 busiest shopping days in the U.S. which includes Wednesday, Thursday, Friday of this week and Monday of next week account for roughly 40% of all holiday retail traffic, according to Sensormatic.

However, retailers might expect even larger numbers this year as high gas prices force consumers to consolidate their shopping trips and everyone converges over the next few days, Sensormatic said. □

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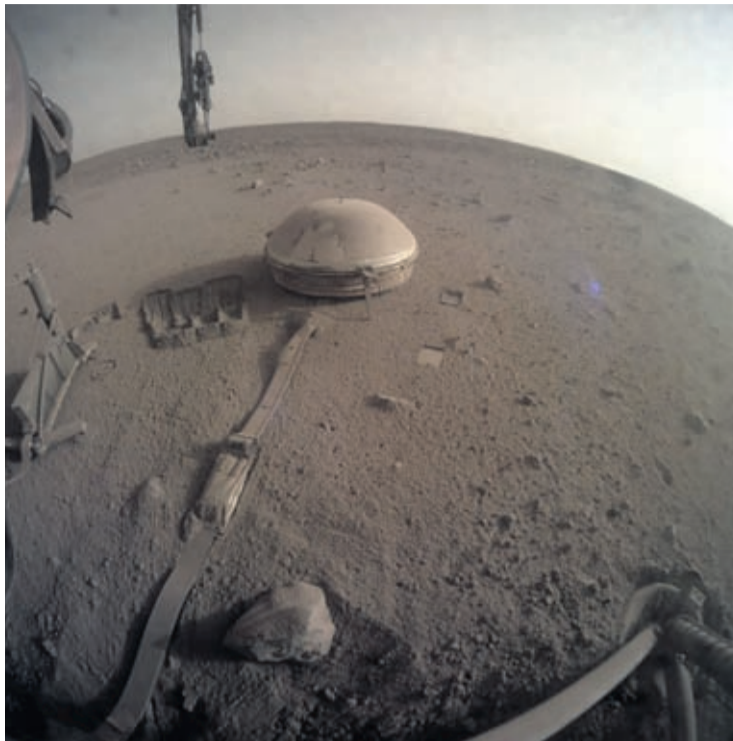
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NASA Mars lander InSight falls silent after 4 years



This image released by NASA on Monday, Dec. 19, 2022, shows NASA's InSight lander on Mars.

Associated Press

By MARCIA DUNN
AP Aerospace Writer
CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — It could be the end of the red dusty line for NASA's InSight lander, which has fallen silent after four years on Mars. The lander's power levels have been dwindling for months because of all the dust coating its solar panels. Ground controllers at California's Jet Propulsion Laboratory knew the end was near, but NASA reported that InSight unexpectedly didn't respond to communications from Earth on Sunday.

"It's assumed InSight may have reached the end of its operations," NASA said late Monday, adding that its last communication was Thursday. "It's unknown what prompted the change in its energy." The team will keep trying to contact InSight, just in case. InSight landed on Mars in 2018 and was the first spacecraft to document a marsquake. It detected more than 1,300 marsquakes with its French-built seismometer, including several caused by meteoroid strikes. The most recent

marsquake sensed by InSight, earlier this year, left the ground shaking for at least six hours, according to NASA.

The seismometer readings shed light on Mars' interior. Just last week, scientists revealed that InSight scored another first, capturing a Martian dust devil not just in pictures, but sound. In a stroke of luck, the whirling column of dust blew directly over the lander in 2021 when its microphone was on.

The lander's other main instrument, however, encountered nothing but trouble.

A German digging device meant to measure the temperature of Mars' interior never made it deeper than a couple feet (half a meter), well short of the intended 16 feet (5 meters). NASA declared it dead nearly two years ago. InSight recently sent back

one last selfie, shared by NASA via Twitter on Monday.

"My power's really low, so this may be the last image I can send," the team wrote on InSight's behalf. "Don't worry about me though: my time here has been both productive and serene. If I can keep talking to my mission team, I will but I'll be signing off here soon. Thanks for staying with me." □



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Assistant Director
Xiomara Arends

Editors
Pilar Flores
Richard Brooks
Angenette Figueroa

Sales
Mark Gomes
Sulaika Croes

Classifieds
classified@cspnv.com

Distribution and Collection
accounting@bondia.com

Social / Website
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Weststraat 22
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The silent film era roars again in 'Babylon'

By JAKE COYLE

AP Film Writer

"Perhaps the ballyhoo meant nothing," Kevin Brownlow wrote in his defining history of the silent film era, "The Parade's Gone By..."

It's probably true that even avid moviegoers have increasingly drifted away from the films of what Brownlow called, with good reason, "the richest in cinema's history." In 1952, the Sight and Sound poll of critics had seven silents in the top 10 films of all time. The recent, much debated Sight and Sound list had just one.

In "Babylon," Damien Chazelle's feverish and sprawling celebration of those halcyon Hollywood days and their abrupt termination, the director of "La La Land" has, with orgiastic zeal, sought to bring back the ballyhoo.

Yet Chazelle's three-plus hour extravaganza isn't the dutiful, nostalgic ode you might expect of such a Tinseltown period piece. It's much messier and more interesting than that. In resurrecting the silent era and the onset of the talkies, "Babylon," like Stanley Donen's "Singin' in the Rain" before it, has trained its focus on a transitional moment in moving images, painting a picture of how technological progress doesn't always equal improvement.

Here, in unrelenting excess and hedonism, is the manic, madcap energy of the movies and the crushing maw of the medium's perpetual evolution. That early freewheeling frenzy is snuffed out (ironically) by the advent of sound and other forces that seek to domesticate the movies. In that way, "Babylon" may be most addressed to our current movie era.

Today's film industry is similarly wracked by forces of change that may be sapping its big-screen verve. "Babylon" is about how the movies are always reborn, but brutally so. Though it may be a chaotic shamble, Chazelle's film makes this one point brilliantly clear:



This image released by Paramount Pictures shows Margot Robbie, left, and Diego Calva in "Babylon."

Cinema will be tamed for only so long; the parade will go on.

This is, to be sure, not a strictly accurate history. Chazelle has taken a "print the legend" approach to '20s Hollywood, drawing partly from the pre-code scandals and myths of Kenneth Anger's "Hollywood Babylon." His film, a romp and tragedy at once, is sometimes enthrallingly, often exhaustingly played at a manic pitch, careening from set piece to set piece. Striving to impress the wildness of the time, "Babylon" overdoes it, striking a cartoonish over-the-top note from the start, and then, for three hours, trying vainly to sustain its drug-fueled fever dream of bygone Hollywood. That makes for an overstuffed and especially by the increasingly wayward third act meandering film.

But it's also an insistently alive one that's hard to look away from, with flashes of brilliance. For a director known for more tasteful and sentimental excursions, "Babylon" is a lurid descent into debauchery. Sometimes it's an unnatural fit. It's too showy and too long. But Chazelle's film is some-

thing to reckon with, and the kind of ambitious swing that a young director of talent deserves credit for daring.

We start in Bel Air, which in 1926 is almost comically rural. In long groves of trees a fixer named Manny (Diego Calva, an arresting breakthrough) is cajoling workers to help him get an elephant up the hill for a mammoth party to be thrown by a movie mogul (Jeff Garlin). A spot on the guest list ("I heard something about Garbo," Manny says to a policeman) is all he needs for most favors. In the film's first opening minutes an avalanche of elephant excrement that cakes even the camera lens; at the mansion in the hills, a bacchanal of sex and cocaine exist both the indulgence and grotesqueness of Hollywood.

The party scene seems designed to match or better Martin Scorsese's "The Wolf of Wall Street" for extravagance.

There's a riff here on the Fatty Arbuckle-Virginia Rappe scandal, but in the heady swirl, the only things that really register are Manny, a Mexican immigrant with dreams of rising in

the industry, and Nellie La Roy (Margot Robbie, in an echo of her performance in "Once Upon a Time ... in Hollywood"), a young actress trying to break into the movies. She's sure of it. "You don't become a star," she tells Manny. "You either are one or you ain't." In its ecstatic early scenes, "Babylon" throbs with their almost primal showbiz aspirations. "To be part of something bigger," Manny says.

They're quickly on their way. Nellie is cast as a last-minute fill-in while Jack Conrad (Brad Pitt), a silent star in the Douglas Fairbanks mold, brings Manny along with him the next day to set.

Each will make their nimble way up, with a widespread cast of characters swirling around, including a Black band leader (Jovan Adepo), a tuxedo-clad chanteuse named Lady Fay Zhu (a bewitching Li Jun Li) and gossip reporter Elinor St. John (Jean Smart, fabulous).

Nothing is quite as vivid in "Babylon" as its teeming studio of outdoor sets (care of production designer Florencia Martin) where Nellie and Manny each find

themselves the day after the party. There is so much more to come after these scenes: the epochal arrival of "The Jazz Singer;" Nellie's farcical first try on a sound stage; a nighttime dance with a poisonous snake; Jack's painful slide out of the limelight, followed by his come-to-Jesus moment with Elinor ("It's bigger than you," she tells him of the movies); a late misjudged plunge into a dark Los Angeles underworld with a mob boss played creepily by Tobey Maguire; a leap ahead to a 1950s movie theater playing "Singin' in the Rain."

Some of these scenes (the sound stage, Elinor's moment) are terrific. Much is overcooked. "Babylon" is never quite rooted in either Nellie or Manny, whose arcs feel increasingly dictated by the film's real narrative engine, Hollywood history. But the best of "Babylon" is there, a couple hours earlier, at the carnivalesque Kinoscope lot in the desert. It's a mad moviemaking nirvana, with films being shot all over and many of the participants women or people of color a reminder that the early days of film were in some ways more open and inclusive than the Hollywood eras that came later.

A Dorothy Azner-like filmmaker directs Nellie, who proves a natural. Up the hill, Manny strives to assist the sprawling sand-and-sword epic that's desperate to get one last shot before losing the light.

"Babylon" is never so exhilarating as when sweat, luck and a chance butterfly conspire to make a moment of movie magic that's sealed with those divine words: "We got it." □

Associated Press



EXPLAINER: Why are baseball teams spending so much money?

By **RONALD BLUM** and
JAY COHEN

AP Baseball Writers

Aaron Judge, Carlos Correa and Trea Turner combined for almost \$1 billion in contracts. Xander Bogaerts, Jacob deGrom, Dansby Swanson, Carlos Rodón, Brandon Nimmo and Willson Contreras added up to another billion.

And that's just nine players. Just one lucrative slice of baseball's December spending spree.

What a difference a year makes.

It has been an epic holiday season already for several teams and players a year after Major League Baseball locked out its players in an ugly labor dispute that delayed spring training.

Judge decided to stay with the New York Yankees for baseball's biggest free agent deal ever, a \$360 million, nine-year contract. Correa has a pending \$315 million, 12-year agreement to join the New York Mets, and Turner signed a \$300 million, 11-year contract with Philadelphia.

Including Wednesday's transactions, big league teams have handed out more than \$2.8 billion in finalized contracts to major league free agents this offseason. That dwarfs the winter spending at this



New York Yankees' Aaron Judge, center, speaks while owner Hal Steinbrenner, left, and president Randy Levine look on during a baseball news conference at Yankee Stadium, Wednesday, Dec. 21, 2022, in New York.

point in each of the last five years.

Through Dec. 20, 2021, that number was \$1.9 billion. It was \$187.4 million in 2020 when teams were coming off the abbreviated season caused by the coronavirus pandemic \$1.6 billion in 2019, \$655.95 million in 2018 and \$413.25 million in 2017. "Whether it's ownership, whether it's teams that fell short in the playoffs, teams that did well in the playoffs, teams that are ready to take a step from maybe

a three-, four- or five-year rebuild, you look up and there's few teams that are taking a step back," Padres general manager A.J. Preller said during baseball's winter meetings.

HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?

The March labor agreement that set industry rules through 2026 is one factor behind the increased spending, but there are several more forces at play. The labor deal included an expanded playoff format, leading to more TV money

for owners, and cleared the way for advertising on uniforms and helmets for the first time.

Under the five-year agreement, the luxury tax threshold rises to \$244 million by the final season and tax rates remain unchanged at the initial, second and third thresholds. A new fourth threshold was added supposedly aimed at Mets owner Steve Cohen but it looks as if the billionaire views that hefty tax bill more like a nuisance as he

pushes his team's payroll to near \$400 million.

If a more punitive threshold system, like a salary cap, had been instituted almost certainly a popular concept among some owners the spending likely would have been more muted this offseason.

Labor peace, of course, is good for business in general, but MLB also is in the process of dispersing the \$900 million it received from The Walt Disney Co. for its remaining share of a streaming service technology company.

That money is expected to go out to clubs before the end of the year.

MLB had new streaming network packages on Apple TV+ and Peacock last season, and it announced in October that fans watched more than 11.5 billion minutes of game action on MLB.TV during the regular season, a record for the streaming package.

This year's World Series had lackluster TV ratings, and in a cord-cutting era, there are major questions about the viability of the regional sports networks that carry baseball games. Attendance was down 5% from its pre-pandemic level, but the spending indicates at least some optimism about baseball's health. □

Associated Press

U.S. House passes equal pay bill in latest women's soccer win

By **EDDIE PELLIS**

AP National Writer

The House has passed a bill that ensures equal compensation for U.S. women competing in international events, a piece of legislation that came out of the U.S. women's soccer team's long battle to be paid as much as the men. The Equal Pay for Team USA Act, passed late Wednesday, will require all athletes representing the United States in global competition to receive equal pay and benefits in their sport, regardless of gender. It covers America's 50-plus national sports and requires the U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee to han-

dle oversight.

The bill had earlier passed the Senate with unanimous support. It now heads to President Joe Biden's desk. The bill stems from a federal gender discrimination lawsuit the U.S. women filed against U.S. Soccer in 2019. Earlier this year, the women signed a new collective bargaining agreement that included identical pay structures for men and women and equitable distribution of World Cup prize money. Over the past decade, most Olympic sports in the U.S. have met USOPC standards regarding equal compensation. But there remained inequities between the men's and

women's soccer teams whose roles in international events, such as the World Cup, resulted in unequal pay structures and different oversight that led legislators to seek to enshrine those standards into law.

"By sending this legislation to the President, both houses have sent a clear message that this is the standard for all National Teams in all sports and it underscores the importance of working with our athletes to achieve equal pay including equalizing international prize money," U.S. Soccer President Cindy Parlow Cone said in a statement announcing the bill's passage. □



United States' Megan Rapinoe lifts up a trophy after winning the Women's World Cup final soccer match between U.S. and The Netherlands at the Stade de Lyon in Decines, outside Lyon, France, July 7, 2019.

Associated Press

NIL casts cloud over college football's early signing period

By **RALPH D. RUSSO**

AP College Football Writer

The early signing period for college football opened Wednesday and in many ways it looked the same as usual.

There were surprising last-minute flips by blue-chip recruits, pick-a-hat commitment ceremonies held at high schools across the country and Alabama signing the nation's top-rated class.

Hanging over it all, though, was the impossible to quantify but hard to ignore influence of NIL money impacting players' decisions.

This was second signing class since the NCAA lifted a ban on college athletes being able to earn money for the use of their names, images and likenesses. There still there are no clearly defined, detailed and uniform rules regulating how third parties can pay athletes.

"I think there's major concerns with what's going on in college football," said Penn State coach James Franklin, who emphasized he supports athletes being able to cash in on NIL opportunities.

"Right now, there's really no guardrails. There's not a whole lot of guidance, and there's not a whole of governance."

Penn State has a recruiting class ranked in the top 15 in



Oregon coach Dan Lanning reacts to a play against BYU during the first half of an NCAA college football game Sept. 17, 2022, in Eugene, Ore.

the country, according to 247 Sports' composite rankings.

It is still against NCAA rules to use NIL payments as a recruiting inducement or offer pay-for-play deals. But with money and NIL deals flowing to athletes through booster-funded collectives, it seems nearly impossible for the NCAA to enforce those rules.

"We all want something if we can get it" said new Nebraska coach Matt Rhule, who returned to the college game after three years in the NFL. "You can see (NIL is) being misused

and mishandled in a lot of places."

While coaches complain about bad actors, nobody names names and NIL is now part of the recruiting conversation, whether coaches like it or not.

"The reality is this day and age you have to make decisions on how you're going to handle this," Southern California coach Lincoln Riley said.

Riley said he believed USC lost recruits to other schools because of NIL deals, but he added that "everybody did."

Notre Dame coach Marcus

Freeman said of NIL deals: "If that's the only reason they want to come to Notre Dame, we're not going to be the right place for them."

The Fighting Irish were on the short end of two surprising flips pulled off by Oregon.

The Ducks received commitments from five-star defensive back Peyton Bowen of Texas and four-star running back Jayden Limar from Washington. Both had been committed verbally and very much nonbinding to Notre Dame.

Oregon coach Dan Lan-

ning and his staff also flipped four-star defensive back Daylen Austin from an LSU pledge and four-star quarterback Austin Novosad from a Baylor commitment.

"I think it's great to be in a place where you can be innovative and ahead of the curve, but I think anybody that really knows college football right now knows there's a lot more to recruiting than NIL," Lanning said. "Nobody picks the place just because of those factors ... it goes back to relationships."

Oregon also signed five-star Matayo Uiagalelei, who picked the Ducks over Ohio State and Southern California.

The California linebacker is the brother of former Clemson quarterback D.J. Uiagalelei.

The Ducks secured the top-rated class in the Pac-12 and top 10 in the nation despite losing out on five-star quarterback Dante Moore earlier in the week. Moore, from Michigan, was a late flip to UCLA.

Not every coach is leaning into NIL.

"We built this program on NIL. We really did," Clemson coach Dabo Swinney said. "It's probably different than what you're thinking, though. We built this program on God's name, image and likeness." □

Argentina only No. 2 in new FIFA rankings led by Brazil

ZURICH (AP) — Winning the World Cup was not enough to lift Argentina atop the FIFA world rankings with Brazil keeping the No. 1 position on Thursday.

Brazil was eliminated in the quarterfinals by Croatia but built enough rankings points from results over recent years that feed into FIFA's calculation.

Argentina moved up one place to No. 2 and beaten finalist France also rose one to No. 3. Belgium is still at No. 4, a fall of two places,

despite winning only one game in Qatar and failing to advance from the group stage. England and the Netherlands, both beaten quarterfinalists, stay at Nos. 5 and 6 respectively.

Croatia climbed five places to No. 7. European champion Italy is at No. 8 despite failing to qualify for the World Cup.

Morocco is the best-placed African nation at No. 11, up 11 places, for its historic run to the semifinals. The United States at No. 13 is the best

of the CONCACAF region teams, rising three places after advancing to the round of 16. Mexico is No. 15. Japan leads the Asian confederation teams at No. 20, up four places, and Australia rises 11 places to No. 27. Both reached the round of 16. Cameroon, which beat Brazil in the group stage, rose 10 places to be No. 33. Qatar dropped 10 places to No. 60 after losing all three games as the home team at the World Cup. □



Argentina's Lionel Messi celebrates with the trophy in front of fans after winning the World Cup final soccer match between Argentina and France at the Lusail Stadium in Lusail, Qatar, Dec. 18, 2022. Argentina won 4-2 in a penalty shootout after the match ended tied 3-3.

Associated Press